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ABSTRACT

An economical strategy used to expand the curriculum at the Peterson (Minnesota) secondary school, a small rural facility, is described. The need for an enriched curriculum was identified on the basis of several shortcomings perceived in the existing school program: few electives, student stereotyping and cliques, and inadequate special needs programs. An opportunity to expand through consolidating with a neighboring school district was rejected in favor of an independent project to revise the curriculum. Emphasizing the advantages of small school faculty flexibility, this plan centered on an interest-based curriculum offering short term courses, a non-graded system, independent study, ability rather than age grouping, and phasing (offering a particular required course every third year). The strategy had several advantages. Students were able to select courses based on their interest, to associate with different groups of students, and to study under a variety of teachers. (LP)

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CURRICULUM DIVERSITY IN A SMALL SECONDARY SCHOOL

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CURRICULUM DIVERSITY

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This article will deal with the problem of curricular adequacy in small school districts with limited funds. It will also explore ways that these districts can expand their curriculum without significant increases in spending. In order to provide a practical as well as theoretical exposition of the problem and sample solutions, the secondary school in Peterson, Minnesota, has been chosen to illustrate the problems and possibilities for curriculum expansion in small districts.

Problems Addressed

The Peterson school district maintained one kindergarten through sixth grade elementary school and one seventh through twelfth grade secondary school. Class sizes ranged from twelve to twenty-two students in the high school. The financial situation of the district was judged to be stable and adequate to maintain educational programs at a constant level.

Peterson's former secondary educational program was administered by a superintendent/principal and eleven teachers. The course offerings included:

1. six English courses, one for each grade seven through twelve
2. five science courses
3. five math courses
4. three business courses

Some of the major disadvantages of the curriculum were:

1. students were sometimes too visible and stereotyped with only one section of grades kindergarten through twelfth grade and very few electives in the secondary school (students remained with the same group throughout their school careers).
2. There were virtually no curricular offerings for academically gifted students, except those offered at the neighboring high school on a "room-only" basis.

A task force and school board considered two options for solutions of these problems, viz. consolidation with a nearby district and/or exploration of curriculum improvement projects that would not involve significant increases in expenditure. These two options were explored from the standpoints of curriculum enrichment and economic feasibility.

Curricular Options

Consolidation was once hailed as the answer to most rural education problems. Even those individuals and communities with fundamental objections to consolidation were willing to concede that consolidated schools would save money and provide their children with more highly educated teachers and administrators as well as more sophisticated equipment and facilities (Sher, 1977). However, a literature review did not support such sweeping generalizations. Economy of scale, i.e., a reduction of unit costs as size increased, did not necessarily occur with consolidation. These economies were often offset by increased operating expenses, particularly in the area of transportation. In the area of curriculum, most of the savings could be attributed to increasing teacher-pupil ratios (Sher, 1977).

It had long been argued that consolidation improved the quality of education through newer and better-equipped facilities and more curricular choices for students. Again, the majority of studies on consolidation have found no significant difference in achievement between students who graduated from consolidated schools as opposed to those from non-consolidated schools when IQ and socioeconomic status factors were controlled (Sher, 1977).

The high school curriculum proposed by Leggett, et. al. (1971), appeared to hold many possibilities for enrichment of Peterson's program. Leggett maintained that a principal-counselor, librarian-teacher, and ten faculty members could readily handle up to 250 students, offer seventy or more courses yearly with more flexibility than larger schools, and provide opportunities for individual and small-group instruction (Leggett, Shapiro, Cohodes, Brubaker, 1970). The Smallway Model, as the authors called their proposal, relied heavily on short term courses, a non-graded system, uncommitted time for independent study, and phasing, e.g., offering a particular required course every third year.

A tentative Smallway schedule was developed for Peterson High School. The advantages of such a model were: 1) many opportunities would be possible for students to select courses based on interest and to mix with students of different ages, as well as opportunities to be with different teachers each quarter. There would be sixteen different literature or speech courses each year for seventh - ninth graders and the same number for tenth - twelfth graders. Such an interest-centered curriculum should help to alleviate type-casting of students and improve motivation. 2) Grouping by ability rather than by age in the written communication area would facilitate remediation of deficits for those who needed it and would challenge the advanced students with advanced composition and interpretation projects. This was to be a big improvement over the former English program where students of the same age but widely varying skill levels were in the same class. The Peterson Smallway Model also proposed multi-age grouping in science courses, some of them quarterly and some year-long.

Another curriculum innovation compatible with modular scheduling and the non-graded approach was phasing of required courses. Phasing involves offering a sequence of courses on successive years rather than one course for ninth graders, another for tenth grades, etc. Phasing could create a problem for a new student who needed a course not offered that year. However, this course could be made available to the student through independent study.

Independent study has been a much-touted, often misused, educational tool. One of the major reasons for its failure has been the lack of planning and decision-making on the part of teachers prior to setting up such a program and the lack of clear-cut objectives and guidance for students. The lack of objectives and guidance on how to proceed in a particular content area can usually be remedied by the use of an appropriate Learning Activity Package (LAP).

The research regarding other options for curricular improvement provided many models adaptable to small schools. In fact, many of the curriculum models of urban schools strive to create small schools within the larger setting. Most of these options can be implemented without a great deal of extra expense to the school district, although they involve many hours of preparations.

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